New York
Theatre Critics' Reviews
1957

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Miss Lonelyhearts"

DAILY NEWS

October 4, 1957

'Miss Lonelyhearts' Brings Pat O'Brien to the Legit for a While

By JOHN CHAPMAN

When you learn that "Miss Lonelyhearts" is about a man who conducts a newspaper column of advice to the bereft, bothered and bedeviled, you might expect a rough, fast comedy in the "Front Page" style. But this play, which opened last evening at the Music Box, is only tough and funny for external decoration; inside itself it is pretty serious.

Howard Teichmann, who adapted "Miss Lonelyhearts" from a novel by Nathanael West, tells of a young reporter who draws the advice-to-the-lovelorn assignment and makes the mistake of becoming personally interested in the hundreds who write to him with the misinformed belief that he is a motherly counselor.

This young man gets more upset than his clients. He broods over their confidences, sees some of them personally and arrives at the conclusion that there is only one solution for all human woes—God and love. He reaches this exalted state of mind very late in life, however, for a few minutes later he is shot dead by a justifiedly jealous husband.

O'Brien's Return

The play brings back to Broadway Pat O'Brien for his first local stage appearance since 1931. A "Front Page" alumnus, Pat plays a hard-talking, lecherous and liquorish feature editor, and he acts him with great charm and easy skill. One of the touching elements of the drama is that Pat finds that he is in need of advice from Miss Lonelyhearts just as much as any of the crackpot readers he holds in contempt.

The young man he hires for this column is Fritz Weaver, and Weaver turns in another of his precise and sensitive performances. In the beginning, the job is just a pleasant chore; but as it goes on he finds himself disturbed by the woes piled on his desk each day—most of them by anonymous writers. When he finds one letter with a real name and address on it he makes a personal investigation and finds a frustrated woman. He permits her to unfrustrate herself in his company and this leads to his untimely end.

Smooth Scenery

"Miss Lonelyhearts" skips about from scene to scene—the feature room, a saloon, bedrooms and elsewhere — and Joe Mielziner's scenic scheme keeps it moving smoothly. Indeed, it moved almost everywhere last evening except into my heart. I was for the play and liked O'Brien and Weaver and many of Teichmann's brisk lines, but I was not as moved as I should have been.

There are pleasant contributing performances by Henderson Forsythe, Pippa Scott, Irene Dailey, Ruth Warrick, Janet Ward, Dan Morgan and others.

"MISS LONELYHEARTS"

Play in two acts by Howard Teichmann, based on the novel by Nathaniel West; staged by Alan Schneider; lighting and setting by Jo Mielziner; costumes by Patricia Zipprodt; presented by Lester Osterman and Alfred R. Glancy Jr. in association with Diana Green at the Music Box Theatre, October 3, 1957. The cast:

Ned Gates...Henderson Forsythe
Goldsmith.....William Hickey
William Spain.....Pat O'Brien
A Boy.....Fritz Weaver
Sick-Of-It-All.....Anne Meara
Gladys H.....Marian Reardon
Desperate.....Jo Anna March
Betty.....Pippa Scott
Claude.....Maurice Ellis
Adele Farnum.....Irene Dailey
Mary Spain.....Ruth Warrick
Fay Doyle.....Janet Ward
Peter Doyle.....Dan Morgan

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

October 4, 1957

THEATER

'Miss Lonelyhearts'

By WALTER KERR

THAT we must love all living things is the message of "Miss Lonelyhearts," and I do, I do. If this burst of sentiment does not quite extend to the new play at the Music Box it is because the breath of life departs it rather early in the evening.

• • •

We are in trouble, I think, from the moment Fritz Weaver begins to suffer. Mr. Weaver is playing an ambitious young newspaperman who is delighted, simply delighted, to be handed a real "plum" on the "Chronicle": the advice to the lovelorn column. He stands up manfully, shakes hands with feature-editor Pat O'Brien, and burbles his gratitude.

This sunny mood is not to last. By the time Mr. Weaver had read approximately three messages from the desperate ladies who seek his counsel ("No one will go out with me. I was born blind. I'm a good dancer") his right hand begun to shake. His left is quick to follow. You watch his chin, apprehensively. It trembles.

Thereafter this capable young actor is given two kinds of scene to play. In one kind —let's say he is caught between a wife who has seduced him and her crippled husband —he must gasp, stammer, bite his tongue, and indicate pain without being able to get a world in edgewise.

In the other kind he is given all the words. They are extremely uplifting. "Warm him in your arms," he says as he puts a hand on the shoulder of a perfect no-good of a tart. "The dreams that men live by are broken by violence, but they can be made whole by love." I'm still not sure whether I felt sorrier for Mr. Weaver in the flailing scenes or in the foaming ones, but I was kept awfully busy trying to figure out which.

• • •

You don't, however, have to waste any sympathy on Pat O'Brien. In the first place he is playing a brash, cynical, snarling, brow-beating bulldog of an editor (remember when all editors wore their hats perched high on their thinning hair, roared for liquor at every turn, and fired their hirelings at the drop of a 'no, sir'?) and you're not supposed to like him. In the second place, Mr. O'Brien is just naturally likeable, no matter what other characters say about him.

He may lean against the proscenium arch in one of the evening's atmospheric "asides," lower his sleepy eyes, and purr contentedly over a thoroughly despicable remark—and you're for him. Aside from a bit of opening-scene nervousness, the man plants his feet like an arrogant Irish colossus, blathers out insults at machine-gun rate, and winks at the follies of the world with a sturdy, sassy, let's-get-on-with-it charm. Like Janet Ward—who plays the bad girl mentioned above—he is strong enough to deal boldly with an untidy play.

The dramatization that Howard Teichmann has made of a rediscovered novel by Nathanael West is as nervous and unsettled as its principal character. This isn't so much due to its dozen or so fragmentary scenes, ingeniously projected by Jo Mielziner on a couple of tetering pylons, as it is to be the absence of any dramatized contest in the hero's heart.

The special irritant — the spectacle of suffering humanity — that causes so much distress to our loving columnist — is never haled into view on the stage. (We are given three hasty silhouettes of tormented letter-writers, but no actual agents of disturbing pain.) As a result, we must take the poor man's word for his beginning tremors, for his increasing anguish, for his religious conversion, for his end as a sacrificial lamb. His word, couched as it is in chewing-gum rhetoric, isn't good enough. Because the report we get is one-sided, the play turns lopsided, refuses to move. The hard-working actors are left huffing and puffing in a vacuum.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 4, 1957

That Uproar Is the Editor

By FRANK ASTON.

Things came to life with a wham the minute Pat O'Brien walked on at the Music Box last evening. He rode a role that fitted him, and what's becoming to Mr. O'Brien is something tough, fast, funny, pithy, violent and reasonably realistic. He had all that and more in the star part of Howard Teichmann's "Miss Lonelyhearts," a two-act, multiscene lunge at the gaudy mind, armored heart and hidden soul of a newspaper feature editor.

A veteran newspaperman would say there never was a departmental boss like this fellow, none with his torrential inventiveness with phrases, his limitless quotations, his amusing and disarming cynicism. Mr. Teichmann magnifies him to heroic proportions, with all his qualities, good and bad, outsized enough to assure delightful theater. In real life you wouldn't care to know him, but you'd sprain an ear to catch the latest shop gossip about him.

Believes in Humility.

This scoffer ("all people are skunks") hires an inexperienced youth ("his mind poisoned with idealism, the bubonic plague of the twentieth century") to conduct a "Miss Lonelyhearts" column. The cub tries to carry on in the manner of his boss, but it doesn't sit too well with him. Out there where only the route boys and the mailmen know the way are people with enormous burdens on their little shoulders, and the columnist begins to worry about them.

He turns away from his girl (his boss calls her "the ideal American girl, well scrubbed and soft as steel"), he is involved with two married women, he befriends a cuckolded cripple and he finds himself believing in humility and the healing power of compassion—this while his boss storms, quotes, threatens and finally pleads in a form of confession which reveals how a sensitive man may take shelter in the manners of an intellectual ruffian.

Swift Changes.

Mr. O'Brien's headlong performance is nicely balanced by the understanding, gentle work of Fritz Weaver as the columnist. Henderson Forsythe contributes a meaty bit as a sardonic reporter. Among the numerous ladies (the editor has bawdy cracks concerning their desirability) Ruth Warrick and Janet Ward, as the too-eager wives, and Pippa Scott, as the discarded sweetheart, are thoroughly successful. And Jo Mielziner's swift changes of scene by the use of scrim and lamps make it look actually easy for Alan Schneider, director, to keep it all at full throttle right up to the blazing climax.

New York Post

October 4, 1957

TWO on the AISLE

By RICHARD WATTS Jr.

The Tragedy of a Columnist

Nathanael West's "Miss Lonelyhearts" is said to be a very fine novel, but one would have difficulty in recognizing its excellence from Howard Teichmann's dramatization, which opened last night at the Music Box. Although the play is clearly a serious effort to tell the tragic story of a young man's quest for God and Love, and the acting is certainly everything it should be, there is a curious hollowness and ineffectuality in the narrative that keep it from either making its point impressively or capturing any sense of emotional power.

It seems a particular shame, because there is much that is potentially interesting in the ironical idea of setting down a moral parable against the clashing background of metropolitan journalism of approximately the school of "The Front Page." Its idealistic protagonist struggles to find the answer to the sorrow and suffering of mankind while those hard-drinking and disillusioned newspapermen of the fine old Hecht-MacArthur tradition look on cynically, and the contrast might have been made dramatically invigorating.

The Column

To give the young man's search added potentialities for irony, he is shown as an ambitious reporter who is assigned by his roistering editor to write a column for the lovelorn under the signature of Miss Lonelyhearts. At first, he is mocking and scornful to his clients, but slowly he comes to be caught up in their pathetic little tragedies, and, in his effort to find an honest answer both for them and for his own spiritual needs, he is killed by one he has been trying to aid. And, too late, his editor sees in him his own lost self.

A number of things appear to have gone wrong in the effort to translate the West novel into effective stage terms. Nothing much, for example, comes of the plan to present the story as being told by a veteran newspaperman with thwarted ambitions to be a dramatist. Then, too, in the course of his spiritual quest, the doomed columnist gets himself entangled in a couple of fairly non-spiritual sexual affairs, and, while both of them are no doubt necessary for the purposes of the plot, they are not very interesting in the telling.

The Editor

Nor does the ruthless and eventually conscience-stricken editor, despite Pat O'Brien's vigorous, vivid and entirely entertaining performance, emerge as much more than a dominating figure from some other play. Mr. O'Brien retains all of his old-time stage authority, and it's good to see him again, but the writing of his part struck me as incomplete. What is chiefly wrong, though, is that the narrative, instead of building up in dramatic interest, declines steadily in effectiveness, for all that fatal shooting in the final scene.

Although Mr. O'Brien is the official star of the proceedings, the central role is that of the columnist for the lovelorn, and Fritz Weaver plays it with the intensity and insight that have made him one of the oncoming actors of the American stage. Janet Ward brings the proper sluttishness to the part of the woman responsible for the final tragedy, while Pippa Scott and Ruth Warrick are helpful, and Henderson Forsythe seemed to me unusually convincing as the newspaper veteran. Jo Mielziner's setting is excellent. But the play is simply ineffectual.

Journal American

October 4, 1957

Pretentious, Unrewarding Experience

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE THING about "Miss Lonelyhearts," a new play by Howard Teichmann which opened last night at the Music Box Theatre, is that it takes itself much too seriously. There is also the fact that, granted we're going to settle down to an evening of allegory and inspiration, the writing should be more compelling.

The drama, a liberal adaptation of a novel by the late Nathanael West, starts out with somewhat the fervor of a "Front Page." There is the comic copy boy, the feature writer hopelessly endeavoring to write a play, and the dynamic and demonic editor. Into this snake pit ambles the ethereal young man who is destined to conduct the "Miss Lonelyhearts" column. The grist of a good newspaper caper would seem to be here.

But then the long hair got into somebody's eyes, and the story rambles off into a consideration of life and its ultimate concepts. There is nothing wrong with such an excursion, but this one takes the non-scenic route.

Noble Grave

The lad, for whom we have no particular concern, becomes so carried away with his task that he deserts his girl, falls in the feathers with one of his correspondents, and ultimately arrives at a noble though futile grave. I'm sure at this point he has been thoroughly regenerated but, unhappily, I didn't care.

What I did care about was that Pat O'Brien, known variously as Knute Rockne, Maj. Cavanagh, and a long series of motion picture heroes, should have given such a good performance as the editor in a play which ought to have been better.

This was his return to Broadway after a protracted absence, and he gave the part that wonderful fast-talking Irish-American delivery for which he owns the copyright. I believed him most of the time, but there were other moments and other speeches when I though he was saying, "Well, you wrote it—I'll say it."

In support there was Fritz Weaver, a most gifted young actor, who made a heroic effort to convince all of us with his torment as the guardian of the souls who wrote to him. I thought he did the job well, and I am perfectly prepared to accept him as a self-appointed Messiah, but again I thought his ardor got the best of him in the end.

Ruth Warrick, portraying the neglected wife of editor O'Brien, was suitably seductive and certainly very competent within the limits of her lines but I never, honestly, believed the character.

I thought Henderson Forsythe was very good, and I liked William Hickey, Pippa Scott, Janet Ward, Irene Dailey, and Dan Morgan. Jo Mielziner has done something with simple sets and lights and projections that deserves a better showcase than "Miss Lonelyhearts."

For I'm afraid I found it a pretentious and unrewarding experience in the theatre.

Daily Mirror

October 4, 1957

ROBERT COLEMAN'S THEATRE

'Lonelyhearts' Has O'Brien, Little Else

It's good to have Pat O'Brien back on Broadway, but we can only regret that he didn't return to us in a better play. For, in "Miss Lonelyhearts," Howard Teichmann has hacked out a rough and tough script from a novel by Nathanael West. Yep, he's used a meat cleaver where skill and a scalpel were called for.

The likeable Pat is cast as a hard-boiled blasphemous, feature editor, who snags a neophyte from his paper's city room to conduct a Lonely Hearts column. He figures that because the kid's papa had been a preacher, he'll be able to dish out the right cliches to miserable people who write in for advice.

But his cynical scheme backfires. For the lad, who had been in rebellion against his cold fish of a dad, becomes "afflicted with idealism—the 20th Century bubonic plague." He develops sympathy for the wretched who seek his counsel, and starts preaching love as an antidote for their troubles. So, in payment for his honesty, he gets a couple of bullets in the belly from a jealous husband.

AS FOR THE editor, it seems that he was turned into a ruthless tyrant — a modern day Chapin—because he'd had an unhappy youth, a loveless marriage and disillusionments all along the way. To his protege he wanted to give a protective armor against an ugly world.

The idea of a man starting as a fraud and ending as a saint is not exactly a new one. France's Henri Gheon used it in a moving drama about the actor Genesius, who satirized the Christians to please the Emperor Diocletian, and himself became a convert and martyr.

Teichmann, in collaboration with George S. Kaufman, penned the delightful "Solid Gold Cadillac" a few semesters back. We suspect that comedy is his forte. He is more adept at spanking fads and foibles with laughter than bitterness. And, in this instance, he has had little help from director Alan Schneider in pulling together and pointing up a diffuse morality play.

O'Brien, an affable and believing man, seems uncomfortable as the scoffing, amoral editor. Fritz Weaver, a handy chap to have in Shakespeare revivals, is not at home as the ambitious columnist who discovers that he has a heart. Henderson Forsythe, on the other hand, is quite at ease as the re-write man who sought the job.

IRENE DAILEY, as a party-girl book-reviewer; Janet Ward, as a sluttish wife; Dan Morgan, as her tortured bread-winner; Ruth Warrick, as the editorial monster's spouse; Pippa Scott, as a nice girl out to help the mixed-up do-gooder; and William Hickey, as a super office boy who cares more for food than writing, get all from their parts that Teichmann has put into them.

Lester Osterman, Alfred R. Glancy, Jr. and Diana Green have spent a sizeable sum in mounting "Miss Lonelyhearts" at the Music Box Theatre. A goodly part of their bankroll must have gone for Jo Mielziner's ingenious setting. It is a collection of towering, off-angle, semi-cylinders, on which lantern slides project locales in the blink of an eye.

The New York Times

October 4, 1957

Theatre: Savage Satire

'Miss Lonelyhearts' Is Staged at Music Box

By BROOKS ATKINSON

THE nihilism of "Miss Lonelyhearts" has one inadvertent triumph: It destroys the drama of that name, put on at the Music Box last evening.

Howard Teichmann, co-author of "The Solid Gold Cadillac," has extracted the drama from the savage satire written by the late Nathanael West. In most respects the play follows the pattern of the original novel.

A scornful feature editor of a newspaper picks an ambitious young reporter to conduct the advice to the lovelorn column. Ambitious, opportunistic, "Miss Lonelyhearts," as the conductor of the column is inevitably dubbed, begins with contempt of the correspondents and confidence in his own cleverness.

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As time goes on, the genuineness of the agony in the letters that come in gets under the skin of the columnist. He is distressed to find himself presiding over a monstrous swindle. For he is an idealist in collision with humanity, as his diabolical feature editor expresses it. Like Mr. West's novel, Mr. Teichmann's play chronicles the disintegration of the columnist, the shattering of his nerves, the poisoning of his spirit and finally his death at the hands of one of his thousands of petitioners.

Mr. West's intentions went well beyond the particulars of the story. "Miss Lonelyhearts" is a contemptuous exposé of everything that is positive in life. In place of religion, decency and hope, it offers uncertainty, fear and confusion. In the satanic brilliance of the characterization of the feature editor, it offers the ultimate destruction of the fabric of social living. Life is a cruel and colossal fraud, it says.

•

In the novel, Mr. West wrote with a driving frenzy that gave the story tension and pace, substance and rhythm. But the episodic structure of the play makes the story soft, loose and remote from reality. The vitality of the novel has been frittered away in bits and pieces on the stage.

As a stage designer, Jo Mielziner has caught the tone of the story more concretely than anyone else. His wide, towering surfaces, bizarre planes and torn-off glimpses of particular places capture the mad incantation of the story. Under Alan Schneider's fluid but temperate direction, some good actors sketch some interesting characters. As the feature editor, Pat O'Brien is excellent—bullying, antic and caustic. Although the surface of his characterization is casual and amiable, the interior is seething with malevolence.

•

Fritz Weaver is also excellent as "Miss Lonelyhearts." He gives a neat, alert characterization of a young man looking for salvation and getting farther from it all the time. None of the other parts is so extensively written; they have to be acted on the wing. They are well acted —Ruth Warrick as the feature editor's restless wife; Janet Ward as an amorous petitioner to the lovelorn column; Irene Dailey as a worldly newspaper girl; Pippa Scott as the distraught fiancée of the columnist; William Hickey, Henderson Forsythe, Dan Morgan and Maurice Ellis as other figures in this tortured dream.

But play and performance lack the artistic vitality that might compensate for the negative quality of the story. Everything goes down before the merciless nihilism of the theme—including Mr. Teichmann's theatre version.

"Look Back in Anger"

Daily Mirror

October 2, 1957

ROBERT COLEMAN'S THEATRE

'Back in Anger' Is Portrait of a Heel

John Osborne can pen dialogue that is trenchant, earthy and often poetic. But he's inclined to be in love with his own speeches. He doesn't know his own strength when he goes off on wordy fights. He lets his characters ramble on and on, taking roundabout ways of getting to points.

These were some of the impressions we had as Osborne's "Look Back in Anger" opened here at the Lyceum Theatre Tuesday evening. It is a bitter play about a lad who imagines himself something of a mental giant, but is really a mixed-up midget. He had an unhappy, impoverished youth, and flames into anger when he thinks back over it.

HE'S AN iconoclast, with a low regard for religion, the conventions and his betters. He is in constant rebellion against success, since he is a failure. He's been a trumpet player in a cheap jazz band, and annoys his neighbors with his raucous riffs on the brassy instrument.

Currently, he is running a sweetshop—or candy store, to you—and living in squalor with an overly patient wife. Eventually, she can't take his insults any more, and goes home to have her baby.

Hardly has she left the sordid premises, when an actress friend moves in to replace her. This sturdy redhead is made of sterner stuff than the frail blonde wife, but she doesn't last very long, either.

This fellow has hidden powers, nowever, for his spouse is drawn back to him, reconciled, almost happy, at the prospect of groveling in the mud. He, in turn, becomes as tender as a heel can. And, make no mistake about it, Jimmy Porter is a first-rate heel.

As the sadistic Jimmy, Kenneth Haigh gives a dynamic and convincing performance. In an early scene he has one of the lengthiest diatribes to deliver that we are likely to encounter this semester, and he brings it off triumphantly. Mary Ure, an actress of quality, is excellent as his sensitive and tortured wife.

ALAN BATES as a gentle buddy; Vivienne Drummond, who's willing to comfort Jimmy in his loneliness; and Jack Livesey as a compassionate father-in-law, who feels that he, too, has been born out of his time, also make sterling contributions under Tony Richardson's resourceful direction.

"Look Back in Anger," we understand, was a success in London and in continental capitals. That it will have a similar destiny over here is doubtful. It appears to us to be another instance of a difference in taste between Americans and Europeans. Perhaps the problems it presents are more immediate and absorbing for our cousins across the ocean.

"LOOK BACK IN ANGER"

Play in three acts and four scenes, by John Osborne; staged by Tony Richardson; setting by Alan Tagg; setting, lighting, costumes supervised by Howard Bay; presented by David Merrick at the Lyceum Theatre, October 1, 1957. The cast:

Jimmy Porter....Kenneth Haigh
Cliff Lewis.....Alan Bates
Alison Porter.....Mary Ure
Helena Charles.....
Vivienne Drummond
Colonel Redfern...Jack Livesey

It took courage for David Merrick to mount this piece in Manhattan. Like Jimmy Porter, he often goes contrary to what's considered popular. He does what appeals to him, and, so far, has made it pay off. It could be that he's right again, though not in our book.

"Look Back in Anger" has a goodly quota of merit. In Osborne, it introduces a dramatist who commands eloquence even in the lower depths. But he has a tendency to go off on tangents, to strew his materials about stage. And we are not always satisfied with his conclusions. But he's a writing man to reckon with.

New York Post

October 2, 1957

TWO on the AISLE

By RICHARD WATTS Jr.

Impressive Drama of Angry Youth

Let me make it clear at once. John Osborne's "Look Back in Anger," the already famous protest play of Britain's postwar generation, is an absorbing and powerful drama, forcefully and beautifully written, filled with stinging wit and almost ferocious scorn, and brilliantly acted.

Presented last night at the Lyceum Theater, with three members of the original London cast in the most important roles, it is a work of distinction and enormous impact. As I did in England, I found some of it fairly infuriating, but there is no getting away from its forcefulness.

We in America have had our share of protest plays in the past, notably those of Clifford Odets, but this is something different. It isn't a political drama, and no one could accuse it of being radical propaganda. What concerns it is far more personal, and it is chiefly a cry of restlessness, of resentment against what it sees as an age of mediocrity, dullness and mental flabbiness, a time without anything worth living or dying for. To a large extent, its protagonist is a rebel without a cause, and his anger frequently amounts to a whine.

Sad Young Man

It is this which gives Mr. Osborne's play what seems to me its sometimes infuriating quality. Its central figure can be, to put it mildly, a most exasperating young man. Although two beautiful women are virtually his groveling slaves, and he has a loyal and worshipful friend, he feels that the world is against him, and, while he spends most of his time browbeating his companions, he is outraged when his moments of being slightly amiable are not immediately appreciated. Despite his eloquence, he doesn't make the most appealing of cases for his generation.

Nevertheless, he is always believable and human, and, quite superbly played by Kenneth Haigh, he has a touch of warmth and grudging idealism (a word the stubborn young man would hate) that can make him as sympathetic to a playgoer as he is to his tolerant friends. Furthermore, the author has given him a sardonic wit and a liveliness of mind which, for all his arrogant brashness, indicate that he is a man worth bothering about. And even the whine is given a certain dignity. He may be an impossible fellow, but he is an interesting one.

Unexpected Compassion

Although Mr. Osborne gives evidence of being as violent, complaining and ruthless as his protagonist, he is also capable of writing with unexpected sympathy. He introduces in one scene the father of the young man's bullied wife, a retired officer of the Indian army, who represents everything that the playwright scorns. Yet he is presented with a kind of compassion that makes him a touching figure. And, even when the author is being savage or dogmatic or a little querulous he writes with a fiery eloquence that is both realistic and stirring.

In a long and difficult role that is frequently a monologue, Mr. Haigh plays with distinguished understanding and variety. As the browbeaten wife, Mary Ure offers a performance of striking effectiveness that is movingly understated, while Alan Bates as the long-suffering friend, Vivienne Drummond as a woman in whom love and hate are equally intense, and Jack Livesey as the father seem wonderfully right. Tony Richardson, who also staged the play in London, has directed it splendidly. "Look Back in Anger" deserves its high British reputation.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 2, 1957

Fine Acting Fails To Stir Dull Play

By FRANK ASTON.

This reporter's stolid mind is still tussling with what it encountered at the Lyceum last evening. What it saw and heard was an English importation, John Osborne's "Look Back in Anger." The mind is sure it witnessed some mighty good acting under the direction of Tony Richardson in a single set created by Alan Tagg to represent a ratty flat in a shabby house somewhere in the Midlands. In its technical, mechanical and professional aspects it was an altogether satisfactory evening.

But the play? It recruits two young women, two young men and an older man. One of the girls is the wife of one of the boys and almost at once one can see that their marriage is what a middle-of-the-roader would call a mistake. Thus we should move into the plot.

What movement we make is via great puffs of words. They are expertly chosen words, bitter, mocking, raucously funny. The husband is what we more refined Americans would call a louse. He's a weakling, a whiner, a self-pitier, a lazy, good-for-nothing slob who derives pleasure from bullying his bleach-blonde wife. This reporter began to lose patience with him.

Merrier Flat.

When the secretly pregnant wife goes back to papa her place is taken by her dear friend, a lush actress. Things at the flat are about as they were before, perhaps a bit merrier, inasmuch as the louse and his buddy suddenly burst into a music hall turn. Where this came from had your reporter all befuddled again.

Anything like a happy ending would be out of order in this rhapsody to unhappiness. How could bliss come to a fellow who says there aren't any big, brave things to die for any more because all that was taken care of in the '30s and '40s—whose wife speaks of him as belonging in the French Revolution and as an "eminent Victorian, slightly comical"? No, there must not be plebeian joy for this self-crucified sufferer.

The acting, let it be repeated, is extraordinarily good. Kenneth Haigh makes of the central character a critter who should fall down and break his neck. Mary Ure's wife is a blend of beauty and an almost ghostly pathos. Alan Bates as the bumbling buddy, Vivienne Drummond as the bosom friend who errs and Jack Livesey as the bewildered father are thoroughly convincing.

It's all quite something as a study of embittered youth. If this reporter couldn't keep step, it must have been because his mental metatarsals were flat.

The New York Times

October 2, 1957

Theatre: A Vivid Play

By BROOKS ATKINSON

TO see "Look Back in Anger" at the Lyceum, where it opened last evening, is to agree with the British who saw the original performance. John Osborne has written the most vivid British play of the decade.

Since we have had angry young men writing bitter plays for a quarter of a century, "Look Back in Anger" will not be the landmark here that it is already in London. But Mr. Osborne is a fiery writer with a sharp point of view and a sense of theatre. Under the direction of Tony Richardson, five British actors give his savage morality drama the blessing of a brilliant performance.

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Mr. Osborne is in blind revolt against the England of his time. In a squalid attic somewhere in the Midlands three young people are railing against the world. They are Jimmy Porter, a tornado of venomous phrases; his wife, who is crushed by the barrenness of their life and the wildness of her husband's vocabulary, and Cliff Lewis, an unattached young man who is the friend of both.

Being in a state of rebellion, neither Mr. Osborne nor his chief character has a program or a reasonable approach to life. From any civilized point of view, they are both impossible. But Mr. Osborne has one great asset. He can write. The words come bursting out of him in a flood of satire and invective. They are cruel; they are unfair, and they leave nothing but desolation as they sweep along.

But they are vibrant and colorful; they sting the secondary characters in the play, to say nothing of the audience. You know that something is going on in the theatre, and that the British drama has for once said a long farewell to the drawing-room, the bookshelves, the fireplace and the stairway. If Mr. Osborne is disgusted with England today, he is also disgusted with the pallor of British drama.

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Not that he does not have trouble with the form. After inveighing against everyone and his wife for two acts with a certain malevolent though tolerable logic, he switches to the craft of writing a play. At the curtain of the second act Helena, a girl who despises Jimmy and is despised by him and who has persuaded his wife to go back home to escape further torture, becomes his mistress, and takes over where the beaten wife leaves off. When the curtain goes up on the third act Helena is at the ironing-board, as the wife was in the first act. Everything has been turned upside down.

This is a bit too pat. During the first scene of the third act, Mr. Osborne finds himself more preoccupied with the job of keeping a play in motion than with hurling words at the world. But in the last scene he is in control again. He is back in top form —twisting and turning, sulking and groaning, turning civil morality inside out and doing other things he hadn't oughter. He is not the man for temperate statements.

If "Look Back in Anger" recovers its stride in the last scene, it is partly because the performance has so much pressure and passion. The acting is superb; it makes its points accurately with no waste motion. As Jimmy, Kenneth Haigh absorbs Mr. Osborne's furious literary style in an enormously skillful performance that expresses undertones of despair and frustration and gives the character a basis in humanity. This wild man is no impostor.

As the tormented wife, Mary Ure succeeds in retaining the pride of an intelligent young woman by filling her silences with unspoken vitality, by being alive and by glowing with youth in every sequence. Alan Bates gives a vigorous performance in a more fluid style as the mutual friend. Vivienne Drummond plays the more ambiguous part of the intruding female with charm and guile.

Everything occurs inside a cheerless, slatternly attic room well designed by Alan Tagg. Miserable though it is, it is sturdy enough to withstand Mr. Osborne's thunderbolts. With the lightning that goes with them, they shake quite a lot of complacency out of the theatre.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

October 2, 1957

THEATER

'Look Back in Anger'

By WALTER KERR

THE hero of John Osborne's "angry" British play is tousle-haired, dirty-sweatered, violently embittered young tyrant who keeps his devoted wife in an attic hovel, sneers at her mother as an appetizing lump of worm-bait, does her physical violence as the spirit moves him, betrays her the instant another pair of arms coils about his neck, and stares in cold, blank indifference at the news that their expected child has been born dead. You are asked to believe, in the course of three acts at the Lyceum, that two women not only love this volcano of random, ceaseless, sputtering venom but that the more abused of them will, literally, crawl on her knees and elbows to beg him back.

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You believe it. The truth about this conscienceless sadist is that he is absolutely alive. He is alive, furthermore, in two quite different ways. Because dramatist Osborne has chucked the sociology books out the window, dismissed the statistics of post-war delinquency (anywhere), and confined himself to listening to the precise, blistering, defiantly honest inflections of a generation that "wants to hear a warm, thrilling cry of 'Hallelujah!" but has heard nothing more than the same old rain, the same old churchbells, the same old static on an out-of-date radio, he has succeeded in raising an image of actual, breathing men and women whose sour, stubborn, but waspishly witty vitality will simply not be denied.

The wit has something to do with our conviction that these restless people are worth worrying about. The man who rests his own nerves by stepping into a back-room to play a trumpet as though he hopes its blast would kill everybody is no dead-end kid. He is intelligent (he cannot believe that "posh" newspapers will squander column after column on a "savage correspondence about whether or not Milton wore braces"). He is tart, funny, cutting in the accuracy of his outraged impatience with every one in sight ("when you see a woman at the dressing-table you see what a refined old butcher she is"). He is capable of tears (the death of straightforward people moves him, his own desire to wound catches him at the throat). He is more than the sign of a generation, he is the sound of it—with all of its talent intact. Because this is a genuine person filled with outrage, we can tolerate whatever is outrageous.

If we are convinced that Jimmy Porter is alive in the world—right now—we are also aware that he is shockingly alive on the stage. An actor named Kenneth Haigh plays him, plays him with a sardonic smile that makes you share its secret joke, with a taste for the roll of rich and stinging words that sweep you along with them, with a twisting, grimacing, helpless volatility that commands respect and a strange affection at every appalling turn.

Under Tony Richardson's now fiery, now quickly sensitive direction, the performance as a whole is beautifully articulated. Mary Ure's bloodlessly patient wife, drained of all response, hopelessly unable to convey the inexplicable love she continues to feel, is drawn in sure, plain, unselfpitying strokes. Alan Bates' friend and roomer (he exists as a sort of "no-man's land" upon which some of the mutual pain of this pair can be visited), Vivien ne Drummond's 'good' girl caught in an irresistible net, Jack Livesey's relic of an older, more tolerant way of life—all are utterly intelligible and often touching portraits.

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The play isn't pleasant. It solves nothing at all. But Mr. Osborne is, first of all, a writer —a real one. He has, in addition, opened up an environment, an atmosphere, a jungle of contemporary experience that is fresh to the theater, and freshly observed. "Look Back in Anger" may not prove to be the most popular play of the season. But it is an early-October bonfire that lights a real blaze on 45th St.

DAILY NEWS

October 2, 1957

Osborne's 'Look Back in Anger' Puts Drama Season on Its Toes

By JOHN CHAPMAN

John Osborne's "Look Back in Anger," which was presented at the Lyceum Theatre last evening, is the most virile and exciting play to come out of London in a long, long time—something to set the wits tingling.

There has been much in the local press about the "angry man." Osborne, whose spokesman in this drama—a splendid actor named Kenneth Haigh—confesses that he is both angry and helpless in today's world. All of the striving was done, he says, in the Thirties and Forties, and now there aren't any good causes left. His temporary mistress, trying to figure him out, surmises that he was born after his time, which should have been the French Revolution.

Zing in the Lines

But, although Haigh portrays an angry man, "Look Back in Anger" is not an angry play, nor a solemn one. It is witty, funny, profound, quixotic, sexy and extremely theatrical. With its proletarian setting and theme and with the zing Osborne has put into the lines, it might be called Paddy Chayevsky in English.

The performances by five actors, as directed by Tony Richardson, are uncannily realistic. Haigh, who must talk about almost everything at an intense emotional pitch, manages to convey that he is a hungry man, spiritually, as well as an angry one. As the wife who gives him up because she can't take it any more, Mary Ure gives a taut, simple performance.

Fine Fellow Players

Another good performance is given by Vivienne Drummond as the woman who moves in when the wife moves out. The two other excellent contributors are Alan Bates as a stolid, likeable fellow who is the husband's best friend, and by Jack Livesey as a retired colonel who represents all that is dead in today's time—and represents it with dignity.

The setting is as grubby as one could find—a one-room flat in a large town in the Midlands. Here live Haigh and Miss Ure—he running a candy shop when he'd rather be a jazz musician and songwriter, and she, a cut above him socially, enduring his rough outbursts until she can endure no longer.

Playwright Osborne is a showman as well as a cynic, and there are several neat twists of the plot. Best of all, he writes with economy and punch. "Look Back in Anger" has put the drama season on its toes.

Journal-American

October 2, 1957

Import Has Fire, Gleam and Glow

By JOHN McCLAIN

AT THE FIRST intermission of "Look Back in Anger" which opened at the Lyceum last night, a friend came over to me and said, "We got in late. What happened to the boy to make him so angry?"

At that point I was stuck for an answer. I had to explain that I was there when the curtain rose, and the boy came out swinging. Why, I didn't know.

This towering rage continues throughout the new John Osborne play which David Merrick imported from London. But as it takes shape through three acts of powerful and impolite writing the reason for Jimmy Porter's impatience and uncontrolled fury and frustration seems valid.

He is the voice of a lost generation, a soul crying alone in a world in which causes have been settled, in which glory is gone.

Holds Relentlessly

Accept this or not, and there will be many who won't, there is no question about the author's talent with our language, with his gift for phrase-making (a compliment he allows one of his characters to pay him), or with a most modern and robust sense of humor.

This is a well-constructed play, enormously filled with words, but except for a slight sag in the second act it drives and holds relentlessly through the evening.

Mr. Osborne's hero, Jimmy Porter, is a young man of poor background and fair education, living in a dreary flat in the British midlands with a wife obviously his social superior. There is also the young man next door, a less literate Welshman, who is genuinely devoted to both of them.

In Porter's failure to find himself in his own generation, in his boiling resentment at not being able to do so, he makes life impossible for those he most cherishes. He has been born at the wrong time, as somebody explains, and when (as the playwright says) he "looks back in anger"—he ain't kidding.

Brilliantly Staged

The role of Jimmy Porter is one of the most colossal in several seasons, and Kenneth Haigh plays it wonderfully well. He rants and raves, he is beguiling and passionate, and he even delivers a charming music hall routine. He is an exceptionally poised and gifted actor.

As his wife, Mary Ure brings us a fresh and appealing beauty, and a performance that rises above the fact that she spends most of the evening rolling with his verbal haymakers.

Cliff Lewis is stolid and sincere as the "boy next door," again holding his own against the bullying of the hero; Vivienne Drummond, tall and decorative, is excellent as the friend of the wife, and Jack Livesey has a telling scene as the father who has out-lived his generation.

The play is brilliantly staged by Tony Richardson, who has managed to inject movement through the meandering moments and made the most of small gestures and symbols. Howard Bay's reconstruction of a cheap flat in a bleak city is good and squalid. Motley's costumes have a sharp share in the proceedings, since both girls and one of the boys engage in frequent on-stage peels.

I have some reservations about the resolution of the play, too involved to pursue here, but I think in sum "Look Back in Anger" is a potent and compelling play brilliantly performed. John Osborne deserves the plaudits that preceded him here.

"I Knock at the Door"

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

September 30, 1957

THEATER

'I Knock at the Door'

By WALTER KERR

THERE'S a good, thumping ebony ruler that descends with a swoosh and a crack a couple of times in the "staged reading" that Paul Shyre has made of the first of Sean O'Casey's autobiographical essays, "I Knock at the Door." It comes down stingingly on young O'Casey's shoulders as he begins to nod during a schoolroom litany; and it lands again, this time clenched in the fists of our outraged hero, on the broad, bald and inviting skull of the teacher who has been so free with it.

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We don't see the ruler, of course, at the Belasco; this is another of Mr. Shyre's arrangements for six silhouetted figures seated behind lecterns against a vast rectangle of blue. And, to push the form as far as it will go, we don't even hear it: though director Stuart Vaughan has here and there made use of a few home-made sound effects, in this instance he is content to let narrator Staats Cotsworth simply hurl a sizzling descriptive sentence in a downward arc that has a slashing rhythm of its own. The effect is as startling to us as it must have been to the half-starved, half-blind gosling O'Casey. The childhood moment comes cracklingly alive.

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Why are these memories of hushed and fragmentary conversations, ribald songs, pub quarrels and family bereavements so delightfully vivid when the players involved are denied most of their customary tools? Partly, I think, because the method at hand has a curious rightness for the evocation of childhood itself. Shafts of overheard speech come tumbling at random from undefined, almost unseen sources; thoughts trail off into music, grow sleepy and then wake with a start; bits and pieces of life get tangled, cross each other, assert themselves when no one seems to be listening. The fragmentary, disjointed, half-assimilated bursts of sound and color that lodge at random in a youngster's head are tossed directly at us in a rich, tumbling, kaleidoscopic free-for-all. This, you remember, is the way it did sound.

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The colors are, to be sure, intensified at every turn by the O'Casey tongue, with its news that "it's wonderful what a man can get along without, according to the doctors" and its lament for a bed-ridden father who was steadily "shrinking from something everybody thought of and no one mentioned." The lift of these voices is tart and funny, and their fall is often very touching indeed.

Whatever noise they happen to be making at the moment is just about perfectly captured by Mr. Vaughan's six players. Aline MacMahon's patient "I couldn't rightly say" in response to every idiot question her youngest can ask her is as quietly moving as her open, frantic despair in an indifferent hospital. (Miss MacMahon does as much with the sag of her shoulders as most actresses get around to with reams of rhetoric.) Mr. Cotsworth's vigorous unreeling of the swift transitions keeps them as graphic as the dramatized scenes. Roy Poole and Paul Shyre lick their lips gleefully over the sassy backchat of bus conductors and barflies, and Rae Allen and George Brenlin do nicely by some briefer glimpses of family discontent, pain and precarious joy.

"I KNOCK AT THE DOOR"

Staged reading of the first of six autobiographical novels of Sean O'Casey, adapted by Paul Shyre; staged by Stuart Vaughan; setting and lighting by Lester Polakov; presented by Lucille Lortel, Mr. Shyre and Howard Gottfried at the Belasco Theatre, September 29, 1957, with the following cast: Aline MacMahon, Staats Cotsworth, Rae Allen, George Brenlin, Paul Shyre and Roy Poole.

Daily Mirror

October 3, 1957

ROBERT COLEMAN'S THEATRE

'I Knock at Door' Is O'Casey at Best

For a rewarding evening, we suggest a visit to the Belasco Theatre. There Lucille Lortel, Paul Shyre and Howard Gottfried are presenting a "reading" of Sean O'Casey's "I Knock at the Door." This is the first of six autobiographical works by the Irish dramatist.

In this instance, that word "reading" is misleading, for here is acting of a high order. Here are six players interpreting an infinite variety of rich roles. It is amazing how they grip your attention, and hold it constantly throughout. The audience leans forward to catch each word, every inflection.

It is to Paul Shyre that we owe this treat. Last season, he arranged a similar performance of O'Casey's "Pictures in the Hallway," and was instrumental in presenting "Purple Dust" at the Cherry Lane. The latter has had the longest American run of any O'Casey play.

IN "I KNOCK at the Door," O'Casey is telling of his birth and youth in Dublin. There had been two John Casides before him. Both died of croup and a lack of proper medical attention. So his father destined that he should be the third. Unlike his brothers, he survived, to carry on the name.

But his early life was a miserable one. He was afflicted with diseased eyes that kept him in endless pain and prevented his making much of a mark in school. But, thanks to a doctor in a six-pence-a-month clinic, his sight was saved, so that he might see the colors of nature and wonder why God had chosen red for the sun, yellow for the daffodil and green for grass.

There were funerals from the Caside, or O'Casey, home. They depressed the impressionable youngster. There were heated arguments about Parnell and Kitty O'Shea. There were unsympathetic teachers to contend with. It was a churning and disturbing atmosphere for a sensitive lad. But he always had the love of a devoted mother.

Staats Cotsworth, as the narrator; Aline MacMahon, Rae Allen, George Brenlin, Roy Poole and Shyre sit on high stools, facing lecterns, on which are scripts to which they seldom refer, against a shimmering blue backdrop framed in black. They bring to life the O'Caseys and their neighbors with vivid and illuminating strokes.

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IT WAS CHARLES Laughton who popularized "readings" of excerpts from plays, poems and novels in this decade. Dickens, of course, had done it long before. So, Shyre had patterns to follow in dramatizing the O'Casey autobiographies. And this he has done with skill and evident affection.

He has turned pages of singing narrative, of graphic description, into an evening of warming and moving theatre. He has proved again that magnificent writing doesn't need elaborate settings to be effective on stage, when that stage is peopled by such virtuosi as the Misses MacMahon and Allen, and Messrs. Brenlin, Poole, Cotsworth and Shyre.

An appreciative bow must also go to Stuart Vaughan for his resourceful orchestration of Shyre's script, and to flutist Frances Blaisdell for her evocative, musical accompaniment.

DAILY NEWS

September 30, 1957

O'Casey Gets Start in 'Knock at the Door'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Paul Shyre, the adapter, and Stuart Vaughan, the director, hit upon a felicitous method of staging fragments of Sean O'Casey's five-volume autobiography when they staged fragments of "Pictures in the Hallway" as a "reading" last year. They have continued the method and gone back to the autobiography with "I Knock at the Door," which was presented last evening at the Belasco Theatre.

Six actors sit on high stools in a row on the stage, with lecterns holding scripts before them. They pretend to read from these scripts, but of course they are acting. They are acting the life of a man who is one of the most greatly gifted writers of our language and one of the greatest hams as an individual—Sean O'Casey.

Lot of Eye Trouble

There was more meat and drama in "Pictures in the Hallway" than there is in "I Knock at the Door," which begins with a feverish account of the actual birth of Johnny Casside—as O'Casey calls himself—and ends with his reading his first books and kissing his first girl.

In between there is considerable dolor about the frightful eye trouble the boy had and the beating he got from the schoolmaster after he was forced by his minister, a Protestant, to go to school. But, although this little stage essay is overly clinical, it does have many moments of wild, irreverent O'Casey humor . . . and it does contain some of the beauty this strange man can fashion out of words.

The company of six is splendid. Aline MacMahon and George Brenlin again play Johnny's mother and Johnny. The others—Rae Allen, Paul Shyre, Roy Poole and Staats Cotsworth—assume as many roles as the sketchy narrative demands, and Cotsworth, the anchor man, serves impressively as the narrator.

The New York Times

September 30, 1957

Theatre: O'Casey as a Boy

By ARTHUR GELB

THANKS to the single-minded devotion of Paul Shyre to the cause of Sean O'Casey, we now have "I Knock at the Door" on Broadway. This is where it richly deserves to be.

A staged concert reading, "I Knock at the Door" has been adapted by Mr. Shyre from the first volume in the O'Casey autobiography. The tenderness, the humor, the anguish and, above all, the poetry that sings from O'Casey's pages are being stunningly evoked on the stage of the Belasco Theatre.

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Sitting on high black chairs behind lecterns, against a pure, luminously blue cyclorama, six actors bring the sad, pithy boyhood of John Casside (who stands for O'Casey) into quick and sensitive focus. His strong, resigned mother, his impetuous, groping sister, the friends and enemies of his Dublin childhood and Johnny himself are gems of truth and beauty, both in the writing and the acting.

So much feeling was generated in a brief scene where Johnny is caned by a sadistic schoolmaster that last night's audience burst into applause when the enraged boy brought an ebony ruler down on the head of his tormentor. (And all of this without props—with the merest suggestion of gestures.)

Throughout the reading, balancing pathos with humor, runs the thread of little Johnny's difficulty with his eyes. There is a ceaseless struggle between the doctor, who is treating the boy's painful cataracts, and the Protestant minister, who considers it more important for the boy to be at school.

Stuart Vaughan has directed the troupe with the ear of a musician, as well as with the sure knowledge of a theatre craftsman. All of his actors slip in and out of multiple roles with grace. The people of O'Casey's crowded youth for whom they speak flare forth—even when only briefly—with superb vividness.

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Delicate snatches of music are woven into the reading; an offstage flute plays wistful Irish tunes and nearly all the actors at one point or other burst briefly and appropriately into a native tune.

Aline MacMahon's mother is a particularly rich and varied characterization. But it's hard to imagine how any of the others—George Brenlin as John Casside, Staats Cotsworth as the narrator and Rae Allen, Roy Poole and Mr. Shyre in a variety of roles—could be better, either. They are all intimately attuned to one another and the onrushing voice of the Green Crow.

New York Post

September 30, 1957

By Frances Herridge

O'Casey's Youth Recreated on Stage

The first volume of Sean O'Casey's six-book autobiography has finally been brought to the Broadway stage 18 months after its glowing debut at the 92d St. YMHA. It opened a six-week run last night at the Belasco.

"I Knock at the Door" has been adapted as a concert reading by the same Paul Shyre who did the second volume, "Pictures in the Hallway," last season. And he has much the same excellent cast to help him.

There could be no better way to bring the full force of O'Casey's poetic prose to the theater. For the author is allowed to speak for himself. His own words are lifted from the page to the stage with skill in selection and building.

O'Casey's storehouse of memories from childhood to adolescence—in all their wild anger and rebelliousness, their caustic humor and love of life—are contained in the two-hour show, with none of the emotion or interest dulled.

A mere six people, on a stage bare of everything but stools and lecterns, manage to project one episode after another—a birth, a funeral, a visit to the hospital, a classroom caning—with more vivid detail than a realistic stage version could have conveyed.

We get to know deeply and quickly what O'Casey's mother and family were like, how his ulcerated eyes kept him out of school, why he hated religious and pedagogical sham. We follow him from birth to his first girl—with all of it recreated in a verbal splendor that brings tears and laughs moments apart.

All six of the cast are so fine that it is difficult to give one more credit than another. Under Stuart Vaughan's imaginative direction, and with the aid of a few spotlights, they seem to be acting with their whole bodies even though they never leave their stools.

Aline MacMahon is particularly moving as the brave mother, Roy Poole and Shyre provide the most humorous characters. Staats Cotsworth is the narrator whose voice inflections say far more than his words. Rae Allen is highly versatile in her range of roles. And George Brenlin is convincing as the boy whom O'Casey calls John Casside.

Here is rich, stirring theater for all its economy of set, costumes and movement. O'Casey's greatness is more in evidence than it has been in some of his plays.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

September 30, 1957

Versatile Six Do O'Casey Proud

By FRANK ASTON.

Two women and four men on a row of stools, pretending to be reading from notebooks on lecterns, executed Paul Shyre's adaptation of Sean O'Casey's "I Knock at the Door" at the Belasco last evening. This form of entertainment may not be new, but when it's done right it generates all the freshness, novelty and satisfaction an audience should desire. And what was done last night was done right.

Essentially this item from the O'Casey autobiography is an old-fashioned mixture of vices and virtues, dealing in pathos, humor, frustration, fear, courage, brutality and hope. In less expert hands it might be no more than quaint, as it tells about a little boy who is threatened with blindess and whose widowed mother with serene faith struggles against poverty and cruelty.

Lamp Trickery.

As the six players take turns at reciting, their listeners look in on the death of the boy's father, on the funeral, the quarrel between his two hotheaded brothers returning from the cemetery, the love affair of his sister, the suffering he undergoes from his ulcerous eyes, his mistreatment at school, the moment he first kisses a girl.

There is no scenery, merely lamp trickery by Lester Polakov. Under Stuart Vaughan's customarily economical direction, there are hardly any gestures. There is almost no movement, but now and then some or all of the cast burst informally into song with notably pleasant results, and the offstage effects by Frances Blaisdell, flutist, help considerably.

All this seems static, and yet when the recital tells how the boy clouts the bullying teacher and how the mother tells the bombastic clergyman to let her boy alone, the illusions are so vivid that the audience applauds.

Credit to Audience.

Some credit for this goes, of course, to O'Casey's understanding of the human animal. And some should go to the audience for having such imagination.

But let the praise fall where it belongs: On the versatile six. On Aline MacMahon for the power she creates in her understated mother and on George Brenlin, an adult, for behaving so completely like a kid. On Staats Cotsworth for holding it nicely together as narrator, as well as contributing several bits. On Rae Allen for the girls she brings forth, and on Paul Shyre and Roy Poole for the variety of characters they pull out of nowhere and present as being absolutely real.

Journal American

September 30, 1957

A Charming Tale--But It's Not 'Theatre'

By JOHN McCLAIN

THIS IS ALL said with the utmost respect for the talent and poetic prose of Sean O'Casey, and for the people who brought a reading of his first autobiographical volume to the Belasco Theatre last night, but I doubt that it constitutes commercial theatre.

Six very capable actors sit behind lecterns on a bare stage reading, or apparently reading, from "I Knock at the Door," the first installment of Mr. O'Casey's charming and incisive tale of his struggles and beginnings in the poor premises of Dublin before the turn of the Century. The lights switch from Staats Cotsworth, the narrator, to the other members of the cast as they pick up the thread of the narrative. There are small gestures and the indication of movement, but it is generally a matter of skilled reading.

Belongs in Hall

My quarrel or, better, my curiosity regarding all this has nothing to do with the form, as such, but whether or not it belongs in a hall; I think clients visiting a legitimate theatre have a right to expect a dramatic production, and this is a far cry from any such.

As an evening of entertainment, it has specialized merit. For the many O'Casey followers this is probably as expert a means of having his writings read as can be imagined. On the other hand, there is nothing against sitting in a comfortable chair, in front of the fire, and doing your own reading.

One's imagination is a brilliant set designer, costumer and director. At the Belasco the flow of fantasy is often interrupted by the same people playing too many parts, or with narration which is necessarily abrupt. It does not, very simply, add to the dramatic impact.

Expert Players

The players, notwithstanding, are all expert, and the pace and precision of the proceedings are first rate. Aline MacMahon, who has made a recent career of being Mr. O'Casey's fictional mother, again delivers an assured and charming performance.

Staats Cotsworth, also a veteran in the same pasture, is once more a skilled and sympathetic narrator; George Brenlin, returning to the role of O'Casey, the boy (created last season in "Pictures in the Hallway"), is equally engaging.

They are joined by Paul Shyre (who adapted the piece, and is responsible for O'Casey's "Purple Dust," which has run over a year in Greenwich Village), Rae Allen, a competent alumna of "Hallway," and Roy Poole, a graduate of "Purple Dust."

All of which is just dandy. But I would feel derelict in my duty to tell anybody to go to the Belasco theatre to see a "show."